

News Release

Senators Pete Domenici & Jeff Bingaman

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DOMENICI & BINGAMAN ANNOUNCE SENATE HEARING TO REVIEW GAO FINDINGS ON CERRO GRANDE FIRE

July 20 Oversight Hearing to Review Federal Fire Policies

WASHINGTON -- U.S. Senators Pete Domenici and Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico today announced that the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee has scheduled a July 20 hearing to receive testimony on an in-depth investigation of the Cerro Grande Fire.

At this oversight hearing, the committee will receive testimony from the General Accounting Office (GAO) on its investigation of the Cerro Grande Fire and from other federal agencies regarding the New Mexico fire and their fire policies in general. The GAO is the nonpartisan investigative arm of Congress. The hearing is slated for 9:30 a.m. (Eastern), July 20, Dirksen Room 366, Washington.

"I look forward to this hearing and the GAO report, particularly in terms of the insight and direction it may provide on improving forest health and controlled burn policies," Domenici said. "In the meantime, we will continue to push to get the federal compensation process up and going."

"I think we have a pretty good understanding of the massive failures leading to the Cerro Grande fire. To me, the value of this report lies in its ability to provide a road map for reducing fire risk in the future," Bingaman said. "In addition to hearing about existing forest management policy, I'm particularly interested to hear if the GAO believes Congress has provided adequate funding for preventative action near communities such as Los Alamos or Cloudcroft."

Bingaman is the ranking Democrat on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, while Domenici is the most senior Republican member of the panel.

Domenici, Bingaman, Senate Energy and Natural Resources Chairman Frank Murkowski, R-Alaska, and House Resources Chairman Don Young, R-Alaska, requested the audit on May 16. They specifically asked GAO to review areas beyond the scope of an internal Interior Department investigation on the Cerro Grande Fire. The lawmakers directed GAO to also review existing policies and guidelines regarding prescribed burns and actions that can be taken to prevent this type of catastrophic event from happening in the future.

The GAO, which has not released the findings of its investigation, is expected to report on: (1) how the decision to initiate the prescribed fire in the Bandelier National Monument was made; (2) what information was available to the decision-making officials; (3) was the decision to proceed with the prescribed fire consistent with the information available; and (4) whether the actions taken were consistent with the generally accepted practices involved with prescribed fire.

On May 4, the National Park Service started the fire as part of its controlled burn practice to clear undergrowth in the Bandelier National Monument. The blaze quickly turned into a catastrophe, prompting the evacuation of 25,000 New Mexicans and closure of the Los Alamos National Laboratory before it consumed hundreds of homes in Los Alamos. The fire eventually consumed an estimated 48,000 acres and has cost the federal government more than \$10 million to contain.